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# The Limits of Autonomy

## Experiences of Freedom of Enslaved People in Litoral of Bahia, 19th Century

## Os limites da autonomia

### Experiências de liberdade de escravizados no litoral da Bahia, século XIX

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**Abstract** This article examines the various strategies employed by both enslaved individuals and freed slaves to establish their own economy and utilize their generated wealth during the first half of the 19th century. It specifically focuses on some coastal regions of Bahia, where the economies were primarily geared towards producing subsistence foods. By leveraging multiple sources, prominently criminal records and notarial notebooks, the study delves into the daily lives of those within and outside of enslavement, highlighting their continuous struggle for survival. It posits that the nature of slavery in regions dominated by

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subsistence economies and economically disadvantaged masters provided increased, albeit relative, opportunities for slave autonomy. This autonomy was pursued despite the presence of adversity and despair.
**Keywords** slave autonomy, Bahia, 19th century

**Resumo** Este artigo analisa as diferentes estratégias utilizadas por escravizados e libertos para constituírem uma economia própria e os usos que fizeram do pecúlio. O estudo se concentra na primeira metade do século XIX, em algumas das regiões litorâneas da Bahia com economia voltada à produção de alimentos de subsistência. Utilizando-se de variadas fontes, especialmente os processos-crimes e os livros de notas, esta pesquisa se debruça na análise do cotidiano das pessoas cativas e egressas do cativeiro e suas lutas pela sobrevivência, argumentando que a escravidão em zonas de economia de subsistência e com senhores pobres, ampliava as oportunidades de autonomia, embora relativa, mesmo que pressionadas pelas adversidades e pelo desespero.
**Palavras-chave** autonomia escrava, Bahia, século XIX

Joaquina was born somewhere in West Africa, perhaps in the region of the Bay of Benin or further to the center of that continent, in the territory that came to be called Angola. Like many people of her time who were forcibly brought to Brazil, we only know her generic origin as "African." She was a widow and, at around 58 years of age, still lived as a slave of João Caetano da Rocha, which must have left her very weak from all the time she had spent working as a slave. Joaquina lived in the locality of Capoeira Grande, belonging to the town of Santarém, about 30 km by land from the town of Camamú, in the district of Ilhéus, on the southern coast of Bahia.[1] Like many others, Joaquina's home was located on her master's land, not in slave quarters, but in a small hut

1 Santarém originated as an indigenous village founded by Jesuits on the banks of the Serinhaém River, with a chapel dedicated to Saint André. It was elevated to a town by the Law of the Directory of Indians of Maranhão in 1758.

where she retired at night and perhaps kept her meager possessions.[2] Living on one's own was not always an advantage for the enslaved person, as in this case, they had to guarantee their own survival, including a place to sleep, food, clothing, and also the services required of them by their master.

Joaquina had a very precarious dwelling and certainly faced problems with the safety of the place due to the infrastructure, which made her scramble to build a new home. With only a 16-year-old daughter, enslaved by another master, and probably without the company of other relatives to help her, everything became even more difficult, so she resorted to the solidarity of her neighbors to carry out the construction, especially for the most exhausting task, which required more arms, which was making the siding. The buildings were made from a framework of wooden poles, tied together with vines, and covered with a mass of clay that was thrown with the hands. The roof was made from the straw available on the site and the floor was rammed earth. These buildings served as a temporary or permanent home for the poorest and were quick to build and inexpensive (Castellucci Junior, 2008, p. 115)

This construction technique was very common and used the knowledge of indigenous groups who had long occupied the coast. Before being expelled to the interior or killed, they spread their knowledge among the local population, including their tormentors, becoming an important cultural heritage (Barros, 2021; Ribeiro, 1987, p. 27-94). On the other hand, it is not possible to say that this type of construction was originally indigenous since it was also present in different parts of West Africa, so there was a combination of knowledge and cultures, which constituted an Afro-indigenous technology preserved over the long term, as a way of building dwellings, especially among the poorest. This type of construction made use of the resources offered by the nature of the place and, although apparently fragile, it was reasonably resistant to the elements and suitable for the hot and humid climate that

2 ARQUIVO PÚBLICO DO ESTADO DA BAHIA (APEB), Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo Crime, Santarém: estante 6, cx. 223, doc. 1.

prevailed in the region for most of the year. Another advantage was the speed with which it was built, not least because the dwelling usually consisted of a single room. On that day, for example, the construction of Joaquina's house began early in the morning and by late afternoon it was practically finished.[3]

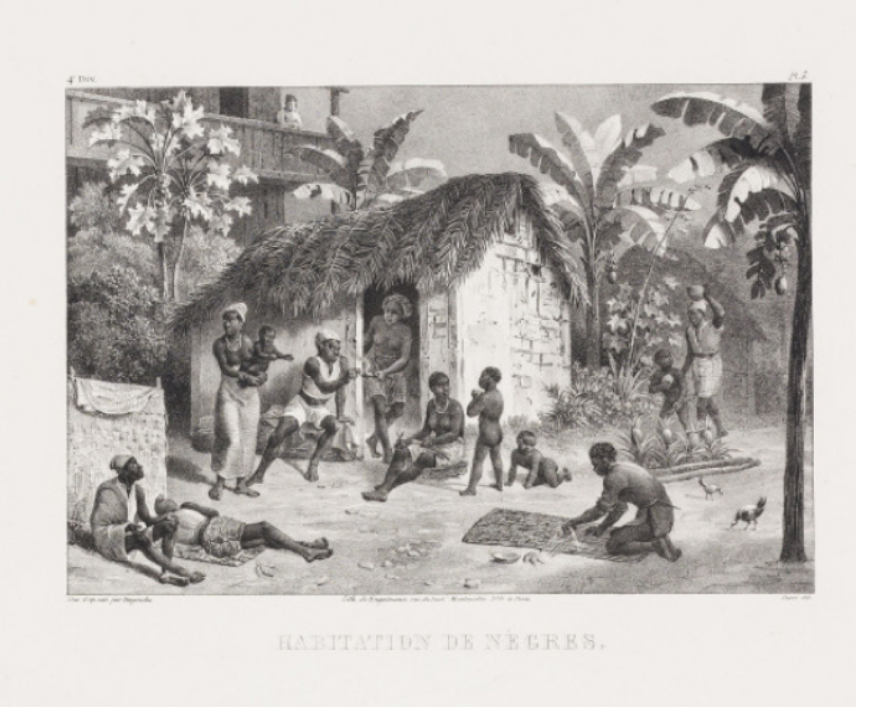
Dating from 1827, the well-known work by the German painter Rugendas, entitled *Habitation de Nègres* (Figure 1), is an engraving produced as a result of the artist's travels through various regions of Brazil, including the southern coast of Bahia. In the foreground, we see a group of enslaved people, apparently taking a break, in routine gestures: children playing and adults engaged in activities to provide for themselves or resting. This is a good imagistic translation of the meaning of "living for oneself," in other words, exercising autonomy, albeit relative, by deciding what and how to do. It is relative for several reasons and one of them is represented in the engraving: the group of enslaved people lived on their own, but on manorial land, see the larger dwelling, drawn in the background, with a white woman monitoring the scene, confirming the contingency of the enslaved people's experience of autonomy.

Rugendas' attentive eye recorded the details of the structure in the engraving, similar to the descriptions of Joaquina's building: mud walls and a roof made of the leaves of some kind of palm tree, perhaps the *dendezeiro*, so common in Bahia. Figure 3, a painting by the Austrian Joseph Selleny, who accompanied Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian on his travels through Brazil, is extremely rich in details of the dwellings and, above all, the lifestyles of freedmen, enslaved and poor free people on Itaparica Island. Robert Slenes (2011) has already explained the details and meanings of these buildings for the enslaved, and there is no need to repeat them here except to reaffirm the influence of Africans brought from parts of West Africa in spreading ideas, customs and techniques. In 1795, the French painter Nicolas Collibert produced a set of images

3 APEB, Salvador. Judicial Section, Criminal Procedure, Santarém: shelf 6, box 223, doc. 1.

with the aim of celebrating the newly established French republic and, at the same time, serving as anti-slavery propaganda. Among the images, the lithograph stands out, also called *Habitation des Nègres* (Figure 2), in which he idealized the daily life of some point in West Africa.

**Figure 1: *Habitation de Nègres*, Johann Moritz Rugendas (1827)**




Source: Engelman, lithographer; second drawing by Rugendas (facsimile reproduction of the illustration in the French edition of 1835).

**Figure 2: *Habitation des Nègres*, Collibert Nicolas (1795)**

Source: *Maps & Atlases, Natural History & Color Plate Books, p. 238.* Available at: https://www.swanngalleries.com/3dcat/2481/238/. Accessed on: 18 Mar. 2024.

**Figure 3: Brasilianische familie am Strand von Itaparica, Josef Selleny (1863)**

Source: Painting from the *Flávia and Frank Abubakir collection.* Photograph courtesy of the Flávia Abubakir Institute, https://institutoflaviaabubakir.org/.

On a trip to Bahia in 1860, Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian noticed the details of the dwellings of the enslaved and freed people and wrote a rich description in his diary, which coincides with the drawings by Rugendas and Selleny:

> When we crossed the mangrove swamp again, we saw one of those primitive black shacks. It was round. Tightly intertwined branches acted as walls. A cone-shaped roof made of palm leaves gave it the appearance of a large beehive, given its round shape. A single opening served as a door, window, and smokehouse [...]. The walls were made of dry branches and barely covered with clay and earth. The roof was made of dried palm leaves and the floor was dirt. As we approached, we chased away some thin chickens from the quiet cottage, which proved to us that it was inhabited (Habsburg, 1982, p. 152; p. 157).

The historiography of slavery has already recorded many other similarities in this type of construction in rural areas, using the same or similar materials to those narrated in the case of the African Joaquina or drawn by Rugendas, Selleny, and Collibert: on the island of Itaparica, in Bahia, freedmen and poor people in general used this type of construction to escape from rents (Castellucci Júnior, 2008, p. 115); on large estates in the coffee-growing Center-South, enslaved people in small groups or families lived in "huts" with similar structures (Slenes, 2011); and in Martinique, in the 18th century, techniques similar to those described above were used to build homes for enslaved people on sugar estates (Volpe, 2017). The result of the authorities' recurrent attacks on the quilombos on the southern coast of Bahia, where their presence was endemic since the 17th century, recorded similar constructions and ways of life so that the vulgarization of these customs points to a previous, long-lasting and comprehensive influence.[4]

4 APEB, Salvador. Seção Colonial e Provincial, Governo Geral, Ouvidoria geral do crime, maço

Along with construction techniques, different ways of life based on the experiences of Africans from the Bantu and Yoruba macro-groups spread to the Americas through the slave trade, which was no different for the coastal strip south of the Recôncavo to the town of Ilhéus, combining Afro-diasporic ways of life. Both engravings, as well as Maximiliano's description, in addition to the similarities in the structure and natural resources used in the construction of the dwellings, show the sociability that existed between the residents of those communities, especially in the collective work that was fundamental for the construction of the dwellings, but also for the planting of the gardens, raising animals around them, as well as for the tasks that each person carried out there. The different forms of work, the strategies that involved practices of solidarity, and the constitution of savings were re-signified, adapting to the conditions imposed by the experience of slavery and all that it had to offer, both physically and culturally.

## Slave fields, paths of freedom

At some point in 1872, someone took the initiative to gather a group of partners to build a new home for the African Joaquina. Paulo, the slave of Manoel Gonçalves de Santana; the freed Creole, Cipriano Francisco dos Santos; the Creole, Antônio, the slave of Donato Malta; Feliciana, a Creole slave shared by two masters, José Gomes de Castro and Dona Matildes; Manoel d'Alla, a slave of Joaquim Pinto de Oliveira; Gertrudes, also a slave of José Gomes de Castro; Joaquina's daughter Cecília, under 16, and the Creole Manoel, both slaves of Joaquim Pinto de Oliveira.[5] The group, therefore, was made up of slaves from different masters and only one freedman. Most of these men and women, like Joaquina, also had their "own" homes in the same neighborhood, on land that belonged to their respective masters. These men and women formed a

572-2. Transcript of the inventory and sequestration of goods found in Oitizeiro (Barra do Rio de Contas - Comarca de Ilhéus), 1806.

5 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo Crime, Santarém: estante 6, cx. 223, doc. 1.

black community that shared similar material conditions of existence and whose closeness was certainly stimulated by the harshness of coping with daily life, the precariousness of life, and the dreams they shared, updating as Afrodiasporic a way of life already known and experienced by their ancestors in West Africa.[6] They worked together on this and many other tasks that required the division of labor in practices known as *adjutórios*. They shared the sweat and the joys of conquests through sociability, which was marked by singing, dancing, and drinking.

It was during one of these moments of conviviality, when they were celebrating the completion of the construction of Joaquina's dwelling, that, claiming to be under the influence of cachaça, the freedman Cipriano hit the slave Paulo, who was working in the adjutory on the head with a stick, knocking him to the ground, unconscious and "with his brains out."[7] According to one of the witnesses, it all started because the freedman Cipriano offered Paulo two *patacas* for the day's service of kneading clay, and Paulo was immediately questioned because of the low price. Cipriano, the only freedman in the group, was apparently a kind of "master builder," a leader in the undertaking. However, the fact that Paulo considered the payment to be insufficient, coupled with the drinks they had already consumed, led to a disturbance, which resulted in Cipriano's deadly aggression.[8]

Kneading clay for siding was not a light or easy job, but it was what was available at the time, and Paulo could not miss this opportunity to accumulate some savings. Although the practice of adjutancy presupposed that the work was unpaid, it was common for people with *expertise* in the area to be hired for some more specialized or heavy services, which may have been the case with Paulo. Enslaved people submitted themselves to the most diverse services that allowed them to

6 Black community does not refer to the group of people who lived relatively close to each other, but to those who shared similar conditions of survival, while at the same time experiencing mutual solidarity.

7 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo Crime, Santarém: estante 6, cx. 223, doc. 1.

8 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo Crime, Santarém: estante 6, cx. 223, doc. 1.

earn some money, the accumulation of which could be used for various purposes, such as acquiring their freedom or that of a family member, buying food for their sustenance, or doing business. However, as Paulo's payment supposedly did not go according to plan, the disagreement caused him serious injuries, which led to his death after agonizing for around three days.[9]

Enslaved people found ways to earn money through activities that went beyond what they did for their masters, whether they were legal or not. In places where the vast majority of masters had small farms with few enslaved people, as were the towns that stretched along the coast south of the Recôncavo to Ilhéus, likely, these "hidden" activities carried out by the enslaved were mostly known to the masters.[10] It was not uncommon for many masters, also living in a difficult economic situation, not only to allow but also to encourage their enslaved to find their means of support, from which they also hoped to gain advantages, either to get rid of the costs of maintaining the enslaved or to exploit the productions and savings of others.

Even if the enslaved person saw the abuses on the part of the master, they had little choice, especially when their master was poor. There was nothing worse for an enslaved person than to have a master living in poverty because the material conditions which he had to be provided, such as food, housing and clothing, became much more limited. Furthermore, a master in poverty or drowning in debt could, in desperation for his own survival, put his main asset, the enslaved person, in risky

9 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo Crime, Santarém: estante 6, cx. 223, doc. 1.

10 Analyzing 91 *post-mortem* inventories relating to the towns of Valença, Camamú and Maraú, between 1800 and 1850, which corresponds to more than 90% of the documents available for research in the Bahia Public Archives for the period, it was possible to see that fortunes of up to one conto de réis reached a staggering 48.7% of the inventories. Compared to the towns of the Recôncavo Sul, this same group of fortunes amounted to 28% of the total and in Salvador it corresponded to less than 14%. The inventories that reached the maximum value of five hundred thousand réis, the smallest of all the groups, corresponding to people seriously affected by poverty, represented 25% of the total. The average number of slaves owned in the region studied was 4.8 slaves per master, but among these poorer groups, this number fell to 1.5 slaves for each inventoried.

situations in order to acquire more savings, sell them or mortgage them in order to pay off his debts, undoing the family and friendship ties that the enslaved person had built up so hard; as well as being more demanding and violent in relation to work. Even so, enslaved people took the risk of achieving any degree of autonomy. After all, this opened up the possibility of "owning" a dwelling or farm and expanding their areas of mobility, moving a wider region, establishing networks of contacts and accessing savings from various sources, experiencing aspects of freedom while still in slavery.

Since the 16th century, the strip between the south of the Recôncavo and the former Captaincy of Ilhéus had been a major center for subsistence food production based on manioc flour, whose main destination was to supply the Recôncavo Açucareiro and Salvador (Barickman, 2003). However, it was often diverted to other provinces or to equip ships going to Africa for the trafficking business (Costa, 2021). This situation worried the government of Bahia due to the constant supply crises that hit the main towns of the Recôncavo and the city of Salvador, generating instability and a lot of confusion (Graham, 2010). On the other hand, the manioc farmers, eager to free themselves from the control and centralization of sales prices imposed by the government through the Celeiro Público, found greedy merchants and middlemen to be the ideal way to make more advantageous deals.

Part of the production of manioc and other foodstuffs, such as coffee, cocoa and rice, that left Camamú Bay, came from the production that slaves and quilombolas carried out under the most diverse conditions: in their free time, in the middle of the bush, on the master's land and under his permission or, as described by Maximilian of Habsburg and Rugendas, on small strips of land around their homes. Although these plots were more common in impoverished areas, enslaved people from large estates also cultivated their own plots, at least occasionally, in the sugar districts of Bahia for their own consumption and for a marketable surplus. Both in Brazil and elsewhere in the Americas, the system of individual plots or plots cultivated by quilombola communities ended up accessing, even partially, the local markets, which gave

these people a significant margin of autonomy (Cardoso, 2004; Mintz, 1974, p. 146-179).

The "possession" of gardens by enslaved people in the Americas, as well as the constitution of a space to live in, had various meanings, including the relationship that was established with their own experiences or those of their ancestors prior to enslavement, perhaps still in African lands, where autonomy was fully exercised. In the context of slavery, this autonomy was partially employed in decisions about what and when to plant, to whom and for what price to sell - choices that had to be carefully considered and that no one but them could make. Therefore, in order to maintain control over that piece of land, which could be nothing more than a small plantation by the side of the road or a hidden field on manorial land, it was up to the enslaved to decide when and how to access the land to clear, prune and harvest, as well as to find ways to avoid theft or loss. All these measures were not imposed or delegated by a master, but actions taken autonomously by the subject. In this sense, the notion of autonomy was confused with the possibility of the enslaved person being in charge of themselves.[11]

The purchase of slaves' freedom, as we know, was one of the purposes of the accumulated savings. Payment, however, was not always made in cash since the mechanisms for obtaining the savings varied and were very slow, making installments a solution for slaves who had difficulty accessing the means of obtaining the money.[12] Ignácia, a Creole, paid Francisco Ribeiro do Amaral 90$500 for her letter of freedom. Before that, however, she had already paid 40$500 to her

11 Engemann (2005, p. 338) used the definition of "managed freedom" to refer to the various ways in which enslaved people exercised their autonomy. Although we recognize that this is limited autonomy, the historian's definition does not seem to be the most appropriate, since it claims a place of control over decisions for the master, which was not so common, especially on small estates with few slaves and poor masters.

12 There is an extensive body of historiographical work on the practice of parceling out freedoms, also known as *coartação*, which helps us to understand how this form of access to freedom was strongly connected to the exercise of autonomy. According to Fernanda Pinheiro (2028), individuals who had their submissive relationships broken from the beginning of their *coartações* were able to access greater levels of autonomy.

mistress Arcângela Maria, Francisco's wife, as recorded in the deceased woman's inventory. We do not know the means Ignácia used to obtain this money, but the fact that the payment was made in installments and took place in a relatively short space of time points to a secure way of building up this savings account, even if the earnings were small. Thus, when Francisco inherited the captive, part of the road to freedom was already under construction. [13]

In 1844, the Creole Francisca paid 150$000 for her freedom, but she was still freed by her mistress, Vicência da Conceição, on the condition that the captive would accompany her until her death, which did not take long. In 1846, when Vicência's will was opened, there was a record of a few possessions, such as "the house of Taipa, covered with tiles, already old, with the insignificant junk that is inside it and the coffee plantation that is around it,"[14] which shows the poverty of this woman. In order for the division of her few possessions to take place without any major conflicts, the deceased had warned that, in addition to those plantations around the house, "the said slave also has several coffee trees near my concession, **which are hers** [emphasis added], and that is why I do not donate them."[15] The fact that a master documentally recognizes the ownership of any property of a person enslaved by him is not common, especially when that master, as in Vicência's case, was in poverty. However, motivations such as solidarity between two women who perhaps, with the exception of their legal *status*, had a lot in common, may have prompted Vicência to recognize the captive's small plot of land. On the other hand, Francisca, who, with the death of her mistress, became effectively free, probably had in her coffee plantation, where she may have worked alongside her mistress, the source of part

13 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 6, Camamú, 01/10/1828 a 06/04/1835, do tabelião Manoel Rodrigues de Souza.

14 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 6, Camamú, 01/10/1828 a 06/04/1835, do tabelião Manoel Rodrigues de Souza.

15 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 6, Camamú, 01/10/1828 a 06/04/1835, do tabelião Manoel Rodrigues de Souza.

of the money she paid for her freedom. The ownership of these plantations, therefore, was an investment that the enslaved made with a very clear motivation: the conquest of freedom (Reis, 1996, p. 364).

Creole Luís, on the other hand, narrowly missed out on his freedom. Since at least 1845, Luís had been in the process of being freed after paying 250$000, in several installments, to his master, Fortunato Ribeiro de Couto, which corresponded to a part (a band) of his freedom, which totaled 500$000. It seems that from that moment on, the master gave Luís the chance to live a more independent life, certainly in order to increase his savings, so much so that the Creole was practically living as if he were freed, using the name Luís Ribeiro. In February 1848, Fortunato became very ill. Knowing this, Luís went to visit him when the master allegedly told him that it was his wish "to free a band." However, before the notary arrived to make the registration, Fortunato had died.[16]

The man's sudden death became a source of anguish for Luís, as he had no record of the payments he had already made and was justifiably worried about his fate. However, when the will was opened and the *post-mortem* inventory surveyed, it was found that Fortunato had not only left a record of the payments made but also recognized Luís' ownership of a piece of land on his property, where the captive planted manioc, which was valued at 172$357. In order to obtain the letter of release, Luís handed over the land and the produce to Fortunato's heirs and, at the same time, paid another 77$643, totaling the remaining 250$00 he owed. He was left without the land, but he achieved his dream of freedom.[17]

Data collected from 75 manumissions in the towns around Camamú Bay in the first half of the 19th century shows that women were able to be manumitted in greater numbers than men: 59% of the total,

16 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 12, Camamú, 10/01/1846 a 24/10/1850, do tabelião Vitoriano Gomes da Costa.

17 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 12, Camamú, 10/01/1846 a 24/10/1850, do tabelião Vitoriano Gomes da Costa.

80% of whom were Creole.[18] When we consider only paid freedoms, the percentage in their favor reached the same proportion. The prevalence of these manumissions exceeded that of men of any ethnic profile and in any condition in which the manumission process took place: conditional or unconditional. This is explained, among other things, by the fact that the female and Creole population was the majority in those lands, but also by the greater prevalence of women in autonomous activities, whether permitted or hidden from their masters. Some services, such as washing clothes in the fountains or streams, going to sales to buy groceries, harvesting vegetables or roots, collecting firewood in the forests or shellfish in the mangroves, could open gaps for women to gain more time for themselves, constituting small but relevant acts of resistance.[19]

In the case of enslaved Africans, the main method of obtaining freedom that we were able to verify in the documentation was also through payment, as happened with Rita, a Jeje, who in 1826 was valued at 190$000. However, she was quick to offer the full amount for her freedom, which must have aroused the greed of Domingos de Almeida Carmo, who, realizing how "easy" it was for the captive to obtain money, increased the value of her freedom to 200$000. Without the rest of the money to pay off the debt in full, she was forced to wait another two years to finally have access to the letter of freedom. This fact reaffirms that, although they managed to accumulate considerable amounts of money, the conquest of these values was very slow, and any change in price could postpone their freedom indefinitely.[20] A similar situation

18 The following towns were analyzed: Maraú, Camamú, Barra do Rio de Contas and Boipeba.

19 Although historiography has already consolidated the prevalence of enslaved women succeeding in the process of being freed, compared to men, historian Raiza Canuta da Hora (2022, p.109) argues that it is still necessary to shed light on the productive and reproductive dimension of the work of enslaved women, especially the accumulation of working hours to which women have always been subjected, with the overweight of activities imposed by the culture of care, which has secularly imposed on women reproductive and maternal tasks with babies, children, the sick and the elderly, as well as with cleaning the environment, preparing food and managing homes.

20 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 4, Camamú, 18/07/1816 a 01/06/1831, do tabelião Domingos Luiz de Menezes.

occurred with the African woman Kutonia, identified as Haussá, who was freed in 1843 by paying 230$000. This amount, however, was paid in a single lump sum, although prior to this offer, she had proposed to the master the payment of 200$000 and 215$000, which were successively denied.[21] In these cases, the masters' perception of the "possessions" of the enslaved and how these economic conditions could be exploited is notorious, especially in decisive situations such as manumission, when the enslaved became more vulnerable to the masters' greed by revealing the amounts they owned.

One detail worth noting is that, of the freedoms surveyed, only 6% of African women negotiated in installments, as opposed to 48% of the respective freedoms negotiated by Creole women. The racial issue may explain this: the mistrust with which part of the free population treated Africans, who were generally considered to be more prone to rebellion and crime, including running away, may have prevented this group from obtaining payment in installments, due to their masters' fear that they would run away without paying the rest of the agreement, so that "African slaves kept their masters in a constant state of insecurity" (Reis, 2003, p. 68-69). Another possibility is that, without further justification other than pure prejudice, they chose not to allow African women to negotiate their freedom because they considered this act to be a benefit or concession that was undeserved for this group.

## Partners in captivity, support for freedom

It was night, around twenty-two o'clock on July 9, 1858, and the town of Camamú was asleep. The silence was broken by the Portuguese Manoel José Ribeiro Guimarães, known as Manoel Barato, shouting to his son, Cândido José Ribeiro, that a thief had broken into his house. At the same moment, Barato's other son, Manoel Ribeiro Filho, accompanied by a Portuguese man named Antônio, who lived in the store of the same

21 APEB, Salvador. Livro de Notas nº 1, Camamú, 07/05/1843 a 09/11/1846, do tabelião Manoel Rodrigues de Souza.

house, rushed to his aid and, surrounding him in the backyard, captured the intruder named Marcelino, who was trying to escape. Marcelino lived in that village as an enslaved person, shared by two ladies, Antônia Teixeira de Aguiar and Paula Vieira do Espírito Santo, probably widows, with possessions that were barely enough to survive on.[22]

Taken away by the police, who soon arrived because of the noise, Marcelino was brought before the police chief, who questioned him. About what had happened, Marcelino gave the following explanation:

> He had not gone in there to kill or steal but for the slave Sofia from that master's domain. As it was the first time he had entered the house, not knowing where the slave Sofia was, he saw her snoring and assuming it was her or someone who could guide him to where she was, he, unfortunately, went to where the master of the house was and touched his arm. The owner of the house asked him who he was and, not recognizing the voice, he replied: "It's me." At this, the owner of the house said, "Go away!" [...] and then he shouted that he was a thief.[23]

Marcelino also said that he tried to escape through a place that looked like the street door, but when he turned the key he could not open it, which forced him to look for the place where he had entered — a trap door — where he ended up being arrested.[24]

Marcelino's testimony seemed to be convincing in terms of his intentions. He explained that everything had been planned with Sofia, his beloved, enslaved by Manoel Barato, who had instructed him to "enter through the trapdoor and follow a plank that is there and that serves as a ladder."[25]

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22 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

23 APEB, Salvador. Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

24 APEB, Salvador. Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

25 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

Apparently, it was a case of a passionate and unlucky guy who broke into a house in the dead of night for a romantic relationship and ended up being discovered by the owner of the house and the master of his beloved. This must also have been Marcelino's intention when he gave his testimony: to convince the authorities that the misdeed was just a love affair.

His well-crafted speech could have convinced the judge if the enslaved man had not made a crucial mistake in his testimony: to justify his supposed romance with Sofia, Marcelino said that he knew a boy called Balduíno and had written him some letters.[26] It turns out that "word of mouth" in the village of Camamú was already spreading that the same Manoel Barato had received a fake letter months before, in the name of an acquaintance of his called José Pirajá, which was delivered to him during the night by a black man who was not recognized. The letter asked Barato to send the bearer a sum of three or four hundred thousand réis, which José Pirajá supposedly needed to settle debts with some farmers. Suspicious of the content of the letter and the bearer, Manoel Barato did not make the loan, but the case made the local news, and now, with the arrest of Marcelino, it has been revived by the police.[27]

Called in as an informant, the boy Balduíno Francisco Alves, just twelve years old, not only confirmed that he wrote letters at Marcelino's request but also reported that at another time, he had written a letter, dictated by the slave, on behalf of one of his mistresses and addressed to Friar Manoel de Santo Elias, who lived in Salvador. The letter asked the friar to send Marcelino six hundred thousand réis in farms. He also said that Marcellin had once asked him to write a letter at the house of a woman called Maria Mittoa, but as he had been late, when he got there, he saw Marcellin dictating the letter to someone else named Plínio, a neighbor of his.

26 The document, in addition to being poorly written, has lapses in the order of the testimonies and missing pages, so it is not very clear when the slave Marcelino gives this information to the judge. APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

27 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

Regarding the letter that Manoel Barato received, Balduíno said, "it was he who had written it at the request of the free Creole Guardiano, son of the Creole Chiquinha."[28] This new character in the plot was called Guardiano Veloso; he was 20 years old and the son of the freedwoman Francisca Teixeira de Aguiar. In his testimony, Guardiano said that he worked in manioc plantations and "any other job, like taking firewood from the mangrove swamp," pointing to a life of uncertainty and few job opportunities, a situation that marked the lives of most freedmen, especially in rural areas.[29] Guardiano lived in the town called Caibá but often went to the village of Camamú and used to sleep at the house of Laurentino José da Silva, who was Balduíno's godfather, where they must have met.[30]

During the second interrogation, Marcelino revealed that he traded with farms, "with some of his own money," and that he also used money from Manoel Barato and his mistress, which he obtained through fake letters.[31] The investigation into the invasion of a residence ended up revealing an intricate network of partnerships that developed illicit businesses based on scams using false correspondence, in which free, freed and enslaved people participated.

In this story, Laurentino da Silva was the leader of a group of scammers who forged letters to borrow money to run their small businesses. In order to expand the scope of his scams, Laurentino recruited slaves, freedmen, and children, in other words, highly vulnerable people who lived on the edge of poverty in a region where there were few opportunities to earn a living, making them extremely susceptible to participating in illicit activities where they could make a profit. This does not mean, however, that these people's adherence to Laurentino's projects was naive. When historiography incorporated the concept of agency, as opposed to passivity, it was to show that enslaved and subalternized people

28 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

29 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

30 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

31 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime: estante 6, cx. 241, doc. 2.

in general, had wills and acted in accordance with them, and were not mere pieces that moved thoughtlessly or were moved by others, without their own will (Machado, 1988). The participation of enslaved and freed people in the group of coup plotters led by Laurentino, therefore, must have been a choice, perhaps compelled by the adversities that crossed their lives, which, in fact, touches all human lives.

Although Guardiano, Laurentino and Plínio were named in the case, only Marcelino was brought to trial. Laurentino and Plínio were not even questioned. More than a punishment for breaking into the house or for the profits made from producing fake letters, Marcelino's sentence — eight years in the galleys, converted into four hundred lashes and iron around the neck for three years — seems to have had a pedagogical function, especially in a place where the enslaved community was claiming and conquering spaces of autonomy.

Before going any further, it is important to understand the meaning that was in use for "partner" and "companion" in the 19th century. In Luís Maria da Silva Pinto's Dictionary of the Portuguese Language (1832), the word "partner" means "one who shares with another in something, companion." This definition corresponds to what was seen in the practice in the relationships formed between the various subjects from different legal and socio-economic backgrounds: alliances made on a precarious basis, in other words, temporary and without major affective ties, intending to meet specific demands from which both could take some kind of advantage, as was the case with Marcelino's involvement with Laurentino and his partners, and also applies to the group that came together to build the African Joaquina's dwelling. Although the definition of "partner" is seen by some historians (Mattos, 2013, p. 135) as an identity constructed from the outside in, in other words, from the authorities' narratives about the enslaved people dealt with in the documentation, it seems reasonable to consider that this definition was not limited to the world of free people and that, even though it is part of the "voice" of the document's writers, it is an interpretation that is based on the concrete relationships established by the subjects.

In different situations, these partnerships arose from a tangible demand for material survival conditions that could affect everyone, albeit in different ways. Momentarily, they put aside possible differences in legal *status*, origin, color or possessions in order to implement the task that fell to them and from which they would derive some kind of advantage, which was not always financial. Building a home or running scams depended on autonomy over their time and specific skills, factors that encouraged the formation of partnerships. Thus, partnerships are consequences of the exercise of autonomy in the daily lives of people who mostly lived in very similar material conditions. I'm talking about free, freed and enslaved people, most of whom lived on the edge of poverty in areas with a basic food economy, made up of small and medium-sized farmers, masters of a few slaves. This profile predominated throughout most of the coastal towns, from the island of Itaparica to the south of Bahia, in the first half of the 19th century. Farmers, masters and enslaved people often shared very similar living conditions, including housing. The establishment of partnerships in everyday life, unlike cronyism, did not require the mediation or regulation of the powers that be, but only the choices made by those involved based on their autonomy, most often based on proximity.

The second definition, "companion," however, adds other values and feelings, more linked to choices made out of affection and whose ties can be long-lasting, extending, above all, into the daily lives of these people. Compadrio can be considered a form of companionship that has been widespread in Brazil since the colonial period. By establishing a sponsorship, compadres and godchildren take part in each other's lives. Among the enslaved, for example, cronyism has always been the subject of well-considered choices. Both on the part of the master, when sponsorship was imposed, and on the part of the enslaved, when they could choose those who were best placed to provide their godchild with material and emotional protection. The same Dicionário de Luís Pinto (1832) presents one of the meanings of "compadre" as the act of "being in good friendship," referring to the same meaning as "companion."

Bluteau (Silva, 1789) defined a companion as "the one who accompanies someone on a journey, a walk, a house, in war; the trade of commerce; in success, or fortune, the one who also participates in it with others. [...] companion in thefts, crime." Being a companion, therefore, acquired a meaning that encompassed various aspects of life, involving both licit and illicit acts, the purpose of which ranged from sharing the tasks of building a dwelling, or making manioc flour to the association of committing thefts and robberies, as we will see below.

At around noon on a Tuesday, November 28, 1850, the Creole forro Manoel José do Espírito Santo suddenly interrupted the task of building a pit to make charcoal in the locality where he lived, called Monte Alegre, which also had the suggestive nickname of Campo dos Forros, located in the parish of Santíssimo Sacramento, on Itaparica Island, on the bangs of the city of Salvador. The reason was the arrival of an acquaintance, who said that the house where the Creole lived had been broken into. At the same time, Manoel's son had already heard the news, and as he was closest to his father's house, he immediately ran to check on what had happened. When he arrived at the scene, he came across a "black man who was robbing the house, but for lack of courage"[32] and went to call a neighbor to help him. When he returned with help, no one was there. Nevertheless, together with the neighbor, he followed the alleged criminals to Fazenda Grande, "where he found the blacks with part of the theft, which consisted of all their clothes and a chest that had already been broken into in the bush."[33]

The two people accused of the theft, both identified as Nagô, were Gaspar, who worked in the fields and as a boat master, and Aníbal, who worked in the fields. The two were enslaved by Captain José da Costa Júnior, a well-known trafficker in 19th century Bahia, and lived in Fazenda Grande, the same town as Campo dos Forros, where they had extensive relations with the whole neighborhood, which was involved in the search to find the stolen belongings. In his testimony, the

32 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

33 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

freed Creole and carpenter, Cipriano de Araújo, who also worked in the fields and was a neighbor of accused, said that the theft "had been carried out by the slaves Aníbal and Gaspar [...] whom he has known for a long time,"[34] and added that the slaves went to Fazenda Grande, where they lived, after the theft. When he heard about the situation, Severino Francisco de Sant'Anna, a freed goat who was also the victim's neighbor, went to Manoel José's house and said that he "found the back door broken down with no object inside."[35]

As far as we can tell, Campo dos Forros was a community made up mostly of freedmen who worked as manioc farmers for themselves or on other properties. Some of them kept other enslaved people, even if they shared them with other neighbors, like Severino Francisco de Sant'Anna, who shared an enslaved person with Estevão Pereira Soares, both freedmen and identified as goats. Many of these freedmen traded their produce with farmers in the region and temporarily used the services of other enslaved people who lived there in search of savings. There were also a small number of farmers who were considered white, such as Aníbal and Gaspar's master, but who did not live in Campo dos Forros, even though they had their crops there.[36]

One does not have to try very hard to imagine that the enslaved people who still lived in the region looked to the example of those who, once freed, had "recognized" access to land and also used other slaves for various services. If freedom was still a long way off, they resorted to survival strategies that would shorten this path, as seems to have been Gaspar and Aníbal's intention with the theft.

While the neighbors were tracking down the accused, the victim, Manoel José, who had also gone out to look for his possessions, went to the slave quarters of Fazenda Grande and found a small box that had disappeared from his house. However, it was empty. Another neighbor,

34 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

35 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

36 In the documentation, the slave Aníbal's name is spelled as Haníbal. However, for the sake of a better reading, I updated the spelling.

who was also part of the search party, Estevão Pereira Soares, a goat, went to the back of the slave quarters, where he found the bundle of clothes that belonged to the complainant.[37]

Finding the clothes and the box where the victim kept his money provided strong evidence to confirm the perpetrator, but the most important thing was missing: the contents of the box. The neighbors began pressuring Gaspar and Aníbal to give an account of the money the victim claimed to have, which had accumulated over time and was in the small wooden chest. The amount, according to the complainant, "exceeded three hundred thousand réis,"[38] quite a significant sum, given that almost 50% of the population in the region had their assets valued at up to one tale of réis. In that place, three hundred thousand réis was enough to buy a slave, according to the average price noted in inventories from that year.

When questioned about the money, Aníbal first denied any involvement in what had happened, but, under pressure, ended up confessing possession, saying, however, that he would not hand over anything without Gaspar's permission, and added that: "he would not say it or hand it over because he would suffer as much by handing it over as not."[39] The slave's dramatic response shows, on the one hand, his awareness of the act he had committed and its possible consequences. In addition to the crime itself, one must consider the fact that they were Africans, which put them in a very unfavorable situation. Regardless of their time in Brazil, they were frowned upon, even by the community around them (Brito, 2016; Souza, 2009, p. 156). In fact, as we can see from the testimonies, the community of freedmen was all on the side of the victim, who was also a freedman. On the other side, the two enslaved Africans were isolated, which reinforces the existence of "ethnic" tensions, even in smaller communities other than plantations. In these communities, although there was greater proximity in people's economic conditions, there were varied

37 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

38 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

39 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

legal and "ethnic" conditions, which aggravated divisions of labor, as we saw earlier in Joaquina's case, and intensified disputes, which were not just for survival, but for social repositioning.

The attitude of the African Aníbal also reflects his fear of the effects of a possible break with his partner in captivity, someone who, like him, was a "foreigner" and carried common sufferings and dreams, perhaps being one of his few references and possibilities for support in that life. In adverse conditions and imminent risk, enslaved people could assume, if not solidarity, their own ethics of behavior and obedience, perhaps the result of years of living in captivity. Hannibal showed no hope of better treatment from his accusers, even if he handed over the money. Deep down, he realized that his condition as an enslaved African limited his scope for action and negotiation.

While they were trying to get them to hand over the stolen goods, the victim spoke up and said that he "did not care about the *mulambos* and only about the pussy that had money in it and that was kept inside the said box."[40] The speeches provide many clues about the material living conditions of the freed Creole Manoel José and the slaves Gaspar and Aníbal. Almost all of the witnesses' statements pointed to a situation of great poverty. When he entered the complainant's house to check on the theft, his neighbor Severino said that it was empty and his belongings consisted of the bundle of clothes that the slaves and the missing money had taken.[41] The victim himself confirmed the precariousness of his life when he characterized the stolen clothes as *mulambos*, showing little concern for the rags he dressed in; what really mattered was that money accumulated with sacrifice and poorly stored in his home - perhaps similar to Joaquina's or the one in Rugendas' engraving - completely vulnerable to the action of greedy or, even more so, destitute people, willing to commit crimes.[42]

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40 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

41 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

42 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

Although achieving freedom was a desire and represented a significant advantage, it was not synonymous with an immediate improvement in the living conditions of the newly freed. With it, a new stage of confrontations and toil began. This is evident when we see that Manoel José and his neighbors, even though they were freed, lived in harsh survival conditions, like so many other freedmen we have dealt with throughout this article.

Returning to the case, we still have things to unravel: Manoel José and his neighbors were trying to get the stolen money back right there, but as the situation of the return was not resolved, Aníbal and Gaspar were taken to the city to be handed over to the delegate, when, on the way, they met Ana Joaquina, Manoel José's wife. Seeing the two slaves tied up by their hands, the woman began to demand payment from Aníbal for a chicken he owed. At the same moment, the accused asked for two *patacas* and four *vinténs* to be taken from his pocket to make the payment. When they took the money out, Ana Joaquina saw a silver coin which, according to her, belonged to him. The situation seemed complicated for Aníbal and Gaspar and they were taken to prison and sentenced by the local judge. When everything seemed to be resolved, Captain João da Costa Júnior, the master of the two Africans, filed a petition asking for them to be released, due to lack of evidence. He also claimed that the imprisonment of his slaves had caused him to lose days of service, and began to demand payment from the plaintiff, Manoel José, for the days the two had been idle. In a very swift decision and unaware of the evidence against Aníbal and Gaspar, about thirty days after the arrest, the judge dismissed the defendants, citing inconsistent evidence, returning them to the possession of their master. He then ordered the poor plaintiff to pay the costs of the case, but he claimed he was unable to do so due to his state of poverty.[43]

The judge's quick and strange decision may have an explanation: João da Costa Júnior, as already mentioned, was a well-known slave

43 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

trader in Bahia and had influence in various parts of Bahian society, which made him a member of the powerful brotherhood of the Santa Casa de Misericórdia in Salvador. As well as operating in the Atlantic slave trade, Costa Júnior had numerous other businesses of varying sizes, selling products in different regions of Brazil (Tavares, 1983). His network of influences, therefore, may have pressured the judge directly or even made him feel cornered, leading him to take the decision that benefited the master and his enslaved people. The profile of the position of justice of the peace, the political conditions in force since the Feijó Law, and the distance from central power are factors that contributed to judges becoming involved in slave smuggling, protecting traffickers or themselves, and ended up guaranteeing the functioning of this lucrative mechanism from which some certainly hoped to profit (Costa, 2019).

With regard to the enslaved, although historiography shows cases of captives who acquired better living conditions or even became rich, this was not the rule in Brazilian slavery (Faria, 2006). For the most part, they lived a life with many limitations, even after being freed. Being enslaved by a people trafficker, as Aníbal and Gaspar were, did not make the situation any more favorable. On the contrary, perhaps due to absenteeism or negligence on the part of the master, it was up to them to earn money to supplement their livelihood, so much so that they had to compete daily for survival with free people, freedmen and other enslaved people. It was for this reason that they owed money for a chicken, which they had probably bought for their own sustenance.[44] In the same way, the bundle of old clothes they scavenged, almost useless, reveals the miserable conditions to which they were subjected in that captivity. In poor regions, seeking one's own sustenance required desperate actions. Thus, when they could not get freedom or earn any income, alternative paths to freedom, such as crime, were not overlooked (Machado, 2014).

More than a crime, this process sheds light on the delicate situation of social groups on the brink of poverty and how they dealt with

44 APEB, Salvador. Seção Judiciária, Processo crime, Itaparica: estante 22, cx. 778, doc. 7.

urgent issues to ensure their survival, seeking access to basic items such as food, clothing, and housing. This led them to make drastic decisions that could jeopardize the rest of their lives, but from which it was almost impossible to escape.

## Final considerations

Regions considered economically peripheral by historiography, i.e. those that were not established as part of the large-scale agricultural complex and were at the back of subsistence food production, had very different characteristics in terms of slave ownership and the form of manorial control. These regions were mostly made up of small farmers with a few slaves who often worked side by side with their masters on the small plantations, generating social and working relationships that were different from those of the large plantations, especially with regard to the master's control over his enslaved.

Predominantly, the rural areas of the province of Bahia in the first half of the 19th century were occupied by small and medium-sized properties, with diversified farming or cattle breeding. Even in the towns of the Recôncavo, where sugar plantations had been established in the colonial period, large plantations were no longer the dominant feature. When it came to the coastal towns, from the south of the Recôncavo to the town of Ilhéus, manioc plantations prevailed, the basis of the Bahians' diet, but also essential for the slave trade with regions in Africa, such as Angola, and even for feeding the troops in Lisbon. In addition to flour, there were other agricultural varieties, from vegetables to coffee. All of this was produced, for the most part, on small farms with few enslaved people, and the poorest had none, or had to rent or share a captive with other masters.

Slaves and freedmen, Africans or born in Brazil, formed a community on the coast that shared similar conditions of survival, marked by the contingency's life, which was a determining factor in the establishment of partnerships, whether momentary or more lasting. These

partnerships were formed because of the need to meet immediate demands for survival or because of the feeling of companionship, which had to do with the formation of affective relationships, but without neglecting the pragmatism of maintaining one's own life.

Networks of partnership and companionship are part of the roadmap for establishing autonomy as a customary right among enslaved and freed people. This way of conducting their lives was not just the result of their experiences in captivity, nor is it limited to Brazil, but rather an indication that there was an Afro-diasporic community there, which is not defined by physical borders, but by sharing similar conditions of survival and a common sense of belonging, which is not always so obvious. This community used the knowledge and skills accumulated from life in Africa, before slavery, by themselves or their ancestors, and those built up in relationships with indigenous people, their masters and other free people, resulting in the techniques used to build the dwellings up to the various forms of collective articulation, including those for obtaining savings.

The demand for spaces of autonomy evoked life in freedom, so it was an act of resistance around the memory of who they were, their African origins, and the effort to rebuild their lives with some dignity. In a community with Africans from different parts of West and Central West Africa, plus people of all kinds born in Brazil, the mixture of customs was inevitable. Thus, as we know, for many African communities, of both Yoruba and Bantu origin, the possession of land and housing was a fundamental part of defining who they were and the possibility of exercising self-government. Thus, autonomy was not limited to access to land, gardens or a dwelling, without disregarding the role that access to material goods played for the enslaved and freed. However, it was a form of African reminiscence, a way of reading the world around them and, as subjects with full self-possession, making their choices, which were not always correct, reaffirming their agency.

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ALEX ANDRADE COSTA

**Os limites da autonomia. Experiências de liberdade de escravizados no litoral da Bahia, século XIX**
**The Limits of Autonomy. Experiences of Freedom of Enslaved People in Litoral of Bahia, 19th Century**

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